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SUBJECT: GVN MISSES DEADLINE FOR RELIGION DECREES

Reftels: A) Hanoi 2009 B) Hanoi 1987 C) HCMC 1388 and previous

This is a joint Hanoi-Ho Chi Minh City reporting cable.

1. (SBU) Vietnam's new Ordinance on Religion came into effect on November 15, but the GVN has yet to issue the necessary decrees detailing how the ordinance is to be implemented (Ref A). Sources within the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) indicated to us that the implementing decrees are pending approval at the next government-wide intra-ministerial meeting, likely to take place at the end of November.

2. (SBU) In the interim, the national-level CRA has not and does not plan to issue any guidance to its provincial counterparts as to how to handle the new ordinance, its officials informed us. The Chairman of the Dong Nai provincial CRA told ConGenOff that, in the absence of instructions from Hanoi, he planned to act "in the spirit of the law," which he indicated included the possible closure of unregistered churches. A contact at the HCMC CRA was more equivocal, saying they needed clarification from Hanoi on some issues, especially regarding the house church movement. A check around with some of our religious contacts suggested there were no immediate changes as of November 15.

3. (SBU) Comment: In the absence of either an implementation decree or other guidance from Hanoi, local authorities have some latitude to interpret the ordinance for the next two weeks. Furthermore, some of the more directly confrontational religious leaders may begin to test the ordinance and/or seek to provoke an official reaction. As such, there is some risk of confrontation in the near future. We will continue to follow up with our official and unofficial religious contacts and will use every opportunity to impress upon the GVN our concerns.

MARINE